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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to demonstrate that a willing recourse to service does not reduce instructors' stature on campus as teachers within, and administrators of, composition programs. Rather, it enriches the work that is done and enhances the contribution made. The paper seeks to appeal to a notion of service from ancient Greece and Rome, "diakonia," as the essential attribute of the good citizen of a community--in this case, the campus community. Further, it enlists Immanuel Kant to equate service with duty and duty, ultimately, with autonomy and freedom. These older traditions do not render individuals prisoners to outdated ideologies; instead, they constitute the roots of the teaching profession and continue to shore up today's endeavors. Educators serve themselves best when they serve their students and colleagues first, and this lends a moral authority to work that is too readily overlooked. (NKA)

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Reconfiguring Service: The Ethical Grounding for Instruction in Composition and Rhetoric

Recently the ethic of **service** within the instruction of rhetoric and composition has received renewed attention, and this has rekindled an old debate as to whether service is an ennobling or denigrating activity. Some hold any association with service to be oppressive to our profession and those of us who practice it. According to this perspective, as long as composition is perceived to be "merely a service discipline," it (and we) will be consigned to the lowest echelon of higher education. Opposing this is a vision of service as something innately valuable that carries its own reward. According to this position, service is the hallmark of good citizenship within the university community, and the opportunity to practice it is something to be welcomed rather than shunned.

I take the latter side, and my task here is to demonstrate that a willing recourse to service does not reduce our stature on campus as teachers within, and administrators of, composition programs. Rather, it enriches the work that we do and enhances the contribution that we make. In support of this, I will appeal to a notion of service from ancient Greece and Rome, **diakonia**, as the essential attribute of the good citizen of a community, in our case the campus community. Further, I will enlist Immanuel Kant to equate service with duty, and duty, ultimately, with autonomy and freedom. These older traditions, I will argue, do not render us prisoners to outdated ideologies. Instead, they constitute the roots of our profession and continue to shore up our endeavors today. Finally, I will try to show that we truly serve ourselves best when we serve our students and colleagues first, and that this lends a moral authority to our work that is too readily overlooked.

Sharon Crowley contends that the traditional ethic of service within the teaching of composition as well as a universal requirement that all undergraduates complete a writing curriculum work together to demean the status of our profession:

> I think that the universal requirement in introductory composition, which is the institutional manifestation of composition's service ethic, has kept the traditional goals of disciplinarity—the pursuit of knowledge and the professional advancement of practitioners—beyond the reach of composition studies until very recently. (253)

Some of her claims can hardly be denied. She states that students chafe at taking composition, largely because it is a requirement, and that instructors find teaching it to be tedious—"the work of the

course is widely considered to be distasteful." (255) Beyond this, an earlier, undue emphasis on syntax and spelling has saddled the profession with a reputation for valuing form over substance.

Actually, she asserts, composition as a whole reflects a misplaced focus on appearances, and this, in turn, can be traced to a class bias in the past on the part of American institutions of higher education. Colleges in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries sought to insure that their students—who were mostly wealthy young men--would bear the imprint of gentility, and this included mastery of spoken and written forms. These means of communication constituted effective instruments by which students could be ranked and ordered among themselves and especially segregated out from the general population as a whole. (255-260)

More recently, writing instructors and administrators have found it convenient to represent the "traditional service ethic" in this fashion: " 'Our students need what we teach.' " (256) Presumably this guarantees job security for us, and it may be one of the motivations for the universal requirement. Hence it is with some irony that she asks, can "it be that composition teachers are themselves somehow served by their adoption of an ethic of service and the discourse of student need?" (262)

By my lights, the answer to this question is assuredly yes, but I do not attach the accusatory implications to it that she does. Writing instructors certainly benefit from their assumption of an ethic of service within the university, but only insofar as they genuinely provide service to their students and to the campus as a whole. This is only partly selfish—when we work on behalf of others, it does ultimately redound to our own benefit in terms of the intellectual and social community that we help construct, but this is not something of which we need be ashamed.

As Crowley views matters, if composition were not a universal requirement, and if its instructors had more time and support for conducting scholarly research within the discipline, our profession would certainly enjoy more stature on campus. *Service* in this sense implies only second-class work and secures for us nothing but the prospect of a disagreeable chore. My recommendation is that we turn this definition on its head and appreciate the opportunity that service presents to us, relishing the chance that we have to reach as many undergraduates as we do. Service, not imposed on us but willingly assumed, is anything but a stigma by which we are scarred; rather, it is an emblem through which we are honored.

For Bruce Herzberg, "community service" is a synonym for "service learning." This is a broader application of the term *service* than that displayed by Crowley. Herzberg accepts the inevitability of service as the lot of composition programs, but he also proclaims this to be a welcome chance to effect social justice within classrooms, on campuses, and throughout communities. Concern for the commonweal and the proper role of citizenship within it strikes him as a laudable goal for writing courses. And service learning is just the right vehicle for realizing this. As he explains,

> [t]he effort to reach into the composition class with a curriculum aimed at democracy and social justice is an attempt to make schools function the way ... students want them to—as radically democratic institutions, with the goal ... of making better citizens, citizens in the strongest sense of those who take responsibility for communal welfare. These efforts belong in the composition class because of the rhetorical as well as the practical nature of citizenship and social transformation. (317)

One can quibble with some of Herzberg's assumptions about the desires of today's students—e.g., it is by no means certain that the students where I work truly wish to make of our campus a "radically democratic institution"—but this may be splitting hairs. The fact is that he comprehends service to be an opportunity and not a burden. Specifically, service is an opportunity for composition instructors to work with their students to create a just campus made up of responsible citizens. Eventually, these students can take their acquired notions of citizenship out into the larger community to transform it, as well. Whatever our individual understanding of precisely what an equitable society ought to be, we can applaud Herzberg's desire to work within composition classrooms to help create it.

If Crowley conceives of service as being detrimental to the discipline of rhetoric and composition, but Herzberg perceives it as an opportunity to create a more perfect campus, then Daniel Mahala and Jody Swilky view it as a little of both. They coin the expression "geography of service," and by it they mean a "dynamic of power through which [a college's] needs are constructed, and through which knowledges and services are designed in relation to such needs ... ." (626) This is certainly a realpolitik-analysis of English departments and writing programs, and it posits that while the presence of power is always dangerous, nonetheless it also presents opportunities when wielded properly.

Mahala and Swilky point to a more innocent--if less sophisticated---perspective advanced by John Gerber in the Seventies that equated academic service squarely with "public service," and this public service normally occurred in the context of adult education. Things have become more complicated in the last twenty-five years, however, and an understanding of service today requires an appreciation of institutional politics and campus power bases. (625) And as Mahala and Swilky put it, the task of a composition faculty is to "resist or exploit service demands" placed upon it, replacing the notion of service that a university's administration may have with one more amenable to the humanistic vision of instructors. (626-627)

The true challenge for a writing program, they say, is for it to "change its view of service so that [the composition faculty] can exploit service demands rather than be exploited by them." (633) If this can be accomplished, then the status of those who engage in service education will inevitably rise, and legitimate student needs will be met in the process. The rewards truly are great for those who can stand up to institutional "regimes of power" and harness rhetorical theory as "resistance" to the oppression that college deans and presidents inevitably visit on their faculties. Used properly, the "geography of service" makes it possible to foment a radical restructuring of hierarchies on campus. (634-635)

Where do these three commentaries leave us? I suggest that Crowley is right in her diagnosis of the problem but wrong in her prescription for the cure. We need not fear enslavement by an ethic of service nor rage against composition's place within the curriculum as a universal requirement. Like Herzberg, I think that the undertaking of service is something that writing programs should eagerly pursue, but not simply because of the power with which it imbues us to transform society. And I agree with Mahala and Swilky that encountering the "geography of service" on campus is fraught with both risk and potential, but not because it requires us to sidestep danger while still enabling us to weaken oppressive hegemonies. I recommend that we reconfigure service as a privilege that elevates the good that we do. If service is a term of disparagement or derision in the eyes of some, let us salvage its prestige through the esteem that we accord it. I propose that we hold service to be a duty that good citizens of the university accept and do not shirk, because ultimately it imputes to them an autonomy and moral character that are impossible to obtain without it.

To illustrate this, I turn to Immanuel Kant and his classic understanding of ethics. In *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he posits that morality within the actions of rational beings with free will—that is, human beings—lies in the extent to which these actions ensue from a sense of **duty**. Hence a truly moral act is one that has no basis in what we *wish* to do or what is *convenient* to do, but rather in what we *ought* to do. In fact, an act that follows from desire alone is suspect from the start:

> Thus the first proposition of morality is that to have moral worth an action must be done from duty. The second proposition is: An action done from duty does not have its moral worth in the purpose which is to be achieved through it but in the maxim by which it is determined. Its moral value, therefore, does not depend on the reality of the object of the action but merely on the principle of volition by which the action is done without any regard to the objects of the faculty of desire. (Melden, 325)

Now, Kant suffers from the occupational hazard common to all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German philosophers in that he is often verbose and obtuse. Still, this does not detract from the originality at the heart of his thought, if only one struggles through his language. (In fact, Kant would certainly have benefited from the tutelage of a good writing instructor.) These long sentences above simply point to the fact that, according to Kant, morality resides in willingly doing what we should do, without thought for the facility or even the efficacy of our actions.

Close by in *Foundations* Kant emphasizes this by stating that "the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect which is expected from it or in any principle of action which has to borrow its motive from this expected effect." (326) Truly this is the opposite of expediency, and for this reason Kant is aptly called *a deontological* ethicist rather than a *consequentialist*. That is, he stresses the duty that lies behind right actions and does not permit consideration of results to determine a moral course. The ends never justify the means for him; instead, it is the means that lend value to the ends. And no act, regardless of how much good it creates, is moral unless it is accompanied by a dutiful motive.

Kant's description of what he terms the *categorical imperative* is justly famous and consists of two principles, only the second of which is applicable here. This second tenet is often called the *principle of personality*, and it stipulates that one should "act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always as an end and never as a means only." (345) People, he tells us, are never simply

objects to be dealt with indifferently or cavalierly. They are always primarily subjects and only secondarily objects, and then only to the extent that they are subjects first.[1]

The implication of the categorical imperative is that ethical behavior resides in respecting others' subjectivity and in refusing to objectify them merely for one's own purposes. Of course, the individuals with whom we most often come into contact on campus are our students, colleagues, and other members of the academic community. Therefore, Kant would say (and as a university professor himself these relationships were ones with which he was closely acquainted), as teachers and administrators we act morally when we accord all of those around us the subject-hood to which they are entitled. Further, we do so not because it is easy or comfortable for us to do so—most assuredly it often is not—nor do we do so because it ultimately redounds to our own benefit—it may, but that cannot be the reason why we do so. Rather, we acknowledge the human status of those around us essentially because it is our *duty* to do so. We ought to do so, and we underscore our sense of service to others when we actually do so.

We might ask why Kant has this insistence on the primacy of duty as the essence of ethics. Today duty often has an unyielding or even sinister quality associated with it in our minds. Does it indicate his obsession with rules, an obsequious desire to please, a sense of masochism, or possibly a subterfuge by which traditional class and sex roles might be entrenched? The answer lies in none of these explanations. Instead, he earnestly believes that duty willingly undertaken is companion to true personal liberty. A slave can be compelled to do his duty, and a servant can be paid to do hers, but only a free and responsible moral agent shoulders duty by his or her own choice and because it is the right thing to do. Kant attests to this by demonstrating that the "concept of autonomy is inseparably connected with the idea of freedom and with the latter there is inseparably bound the universal principle of morality, which ideally is the ground of all actions of rational beings ... ." (359) Thus the person who opts to do his or her duty is free and moral, and this constitutes the highest form of virtue for Kant.

This brings us back full circle to what we as teachers in, and administrators of, composition programs can do when faced with the prospect of service requirements on behalf of a college or university. My suggestion is that we do not disdain, avoid, or attempt to subvert them. I recommend that we neither

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[1] Lest I be accused of too summarily dismissing the first principle, it is normally termed the *universal law principle* and holds that "there is ... only one categorical imperative. It is: Act only according to that

perceive a diminution of our academic roles in them nor allow others to use them to diminish us. Service to an academic institution is not something for which we ought to hang our heads, and it is certainly not anathema to what we do. It actually lies at the core of our mission and lends authority and integrity to our endeavors. If we construe service to be the true duty of the academic, then our practice of it will imbue us with an autonomy and ethical character that will only add richness to our profession.

We can revisit the roots of our discipline, the tradition of logic and rhetoric in ancient Athens and the other Greek *poleis*, and find a concept that can assist us in this task. It is that of **diakonia,** or service to the citizens and commonweal as a whole. Service could take many forms, e.g., public service in democratic self-governance, in the military, and in education. It might also entail service in agriculture, commerce, or the fine arts. Whatever form it might assume, though, it had an obligatory character about it in that it was the duty of citizens. To be a **diakonos**, a servant, in this *public* fashion conveyed no shame or embarrassment. And it brought no special acclaim, either, because it was the expected work of citizenship. Diakonia was perceived very much to be the legitimate price that citizens paid for the privilege of being members of a community.

During the Roman Republic we find another instance of this same sort of citizenship. Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, a fifth-century BCE patriot and military commander had retired to his farm outside Rome in his fifties after years of service to the state. Then, on two occasions—once when he was in his early sixties and then again when he was around eighty—national emergencies prompted the Senate to call upon his services. He responded each time, was granted temporary dictatorial powers, and took command of armies. On both occasions he met the crises and resolved them. At these points he had the authority and reputation to have had his way in Rome, perhaps even to the extent of ending the republic and assuming permanent control as a genuine strong man on a horse. Yet he refused. On the first occasion he would not even enter the city and march at the head of his army to receive the tribute that was due him as a victorious general. Instead, he turned over his troops to his second-in-command and left immediately for his estate.

For centuries now Cincinnatus' propriety has served as an example of responsible citizenship. He refused to trade on his acclaim in order to acquire power and honor that could very well have been his. It seems as if he was motivated by a sense of decorum that compelled duty and responsibility but forbade

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maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (339) This is to say

personal aggrandizement. His fellow citizens credited this to him as selflessness, and they felt comfortable extending an autocrat's authority to him a second time because they recalled how it had wielded it the first.

I am not suggesting exactly this model of citizen-warrior for us to follow at the schools where we are--although I have known those who have gone to war for the principles in which they believed and were not reluctant to term their campuses battlegrounds. What I am espousing, however, is the paradigm of service on behalf of the academic community by its citizens. We, of course, are its citizens, and we are just as much citizens as our colleagues in the departments of engineering, biology, and international relations. This status of citizenship is one that can be taken from us only if we give it up. And displaying citizenship through service conceived as duty is the best way to insure its irrevocability.

Service to our students, peers, departments, programs, and institutions can also be seen as the requisite professionalism that we owe our discipline. Even if some on campus may not fully appreciate the service that we render, we actually perform it more for our own benefit than theirs. The most critical standards for us are the ones that we set for ourselves, and it may be futile to attempt to comply with those established by others who suffer under ignorance. (As autobiography, I once felt awed in the presence of faculty and administrators from the professional schools on my own campus, as if those from the law school, medical school, and the rest were luminaries and I a mere satellite. Now I appreciate that my education, training, and experience are often more worthy than theirs, and I refuse to take up a place in their orbit.)

I should note, too, that the role that I perceive for us as **diakonoi**, or servants, is not that of slaves but rather that of **curators**. Our most authentic work is in the *care* that we provide for the writing task on campus. This curative task naturally applies to students, undergraduates and graduates, but also to faculty and administrators. The calculus instructor just as much as the sociology professor often mistakenly regards him- or herself as both an expert writer and expert teacher of writing. Just leave it to them (or at least to their teaching assistants), they assure us, and they'll inspire fine samples of expository writing by their students. (Of course, they may require us to do a bit of editing and proofreading—you know, just general polishing—of their students' texts—oh, and by the way, perhaps we could have a quick look at their latest grant proposals, too, since they, uncharacteristically, just can't seem to imbue these with the

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that one's actions are justified only to the extent that they are right for everyone always and everywhere.

right spirit this time.) And I have often been amazed at the mediocre cogency, syntax, and style that are produced by these self-anointed Hemingways. Yet all that these instances have done is confirm the genuine need for our care in the writing produced by all of our fellow citizens of the university. The truth is that we need each other in order to fashion a great campus. Usually we--and our colleagues--know this. When this is not the case, we still have recourse to our voluntary duty of service. It provides an ethic for campus citizenship that others would be well advised to adopt. Whether or not they do so, however, it will always remain the proper season in academe for us, the curators of the writing function.

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